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The Iranian Revolution of 1979 has unleashed a flood of books on the causes and consequences of the rise of political Islam and the failure of Western-supported modernizing states.

Ervand Abrahamian's new book is important because it is the first detailed academic work that deals with the conditions of the prisons and the horrors of the criminal system—the torture, the forced confessions, and the executions—in the newly established theocratic state. This book is a testimony to the horrors of self-righteous ideological regimes whose ruling elite claims a monopoly on truth and the knowledge of what is best for its citizens. This is a chilling book that should be read by all scholars and non-scholars who care about human rights.

In the Introduction, Abrahamian briefly discusses his conceptualization of punishment, imprisonment, and torture. Without seriously engaging them, Abrahamian rejects the relationship Michel Foucault establishes between torture and modernity, a view applied to the Iranian scene by Darius Rejali in his *Torture and Modernity: Self, Society, and State in Modern Iran* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994). For Abrahamian, torture has little to do with modernity or tradition. It is about "ideological warfare, political mobilization, and the need to win 'hearts and minds'" (p. 3). The Islamic Republic uses torture in order to force its political opposition to disavow its ideological and organizational affiliations and submit to the authority and ideology of the ruling clerics. Confessions and recantations obtained from prisoners, often published in print media or aired on television, serve as positive propaganda for the regime and negative propaganda against the recanters' political or ideological group. In Iran, this practice was started by the Shah in the 1970s and perfected by Khomeini in the 1980s to a level unimaginable by the likes of Stalin, Mao, and the Shah—not to mention the Tudors, the Spanish Inquisition or the European witch-hunters (p. 13).

Chapter 1 discusses the criminal system during Reza Shah's rule. It compares the traditional Iranian and European legal systems by noting their similarities in rejecting circumstantial evidence, using punishment as a deterrent, and locating punishment on the body, and their difference in the existence of witch-hunting in Europe. Judicial reforms beginning in the late 19th century and continuing through the Reza Shah period replaced corporal punishment with prolonged incarceration, established a modern prison system, and severed the control of tribal chiefs, local magnates, and the clerics over the criminal-justice system. The first political prisoners were Iranian communists, then other prominent figures who either opposed Reza Shah or fell out of favor with him. Ironically, one of these included Firuz Mirza, the man who helped to build Qasr prison. Then came the famous imprisonment of the fifty-three communists. The chapter provides an extensive review of these prisoners' background, activities, and prison life. While harsh and constraining, prison life was more tolerable at that time than later years.

Chapter 2 begins with developments in the early years of Muhammad Reza Shah's rule (1941–53): the virtual disappearance of corporal punishment from the public arena, the Shah's increasing control over the army and decreasing interest in civilian institutions, the independence of the judiciary, the emergence and activities of the Tudeh Party, the Soviet demand for oil concessions and its support for the Azerbaijani and Kurdish revolts in Iran, the rise and fall of Mossadeq, the role of the Tudeh Party in the latter events, and the subsequent banishment of this party and the arrest of its members. Abrahamian discusses most of these developments in the light of the experiences of members of the Tudeh Party in captivity. Though prison life had become harsher and more horrifying, the prisoners still were able to maintain their group solidarity, read and write books, and interact with their fellows inside and outside prisons.

With the emergence of a guerrilla movement in 1971, both prison life and the composition of the prisoners changed. The prisoners now included younger people from the lower and middle classes, many of them students, and had diverse political and ideological affiliations. Torture, which had receded in the previous periods, was used widely and more methodically. Threatened by the ideological appeal of this movement among the youth, the Shah initiated the public airing of forced confessions and recantations by famous prisoners.
Chapter 3 deals with prison conditions, arrests, torture, and forced confessions of prisoners from February 1979, when the Islamic Republic was established, until June 1988. Abrahamian broadens his coverage and gives attention to the treatment of the mujahedin, non-Tudeh Party leftists, liberals, royaltyists, and religious forces. The first wave of summary executions included high-ranking members of the previous regime sentenced by the hanging judge Ayatollah Khahchali. Then came the reign of terror starting in June 1981, when members of the Minority Fedayi and mujahedin organizations were arrested en masse and executed as these groups began to challenge the new regime. The Islamization of the judiciary subjected the political prisoners to much harsher sentences, more arbitrary arrests and summary trials, tougher prison conditions, ideological brainwashing and forced confessions, and unprecedented experiences with mock and real death squads. As the decade progressed, religious intellectuals, including several former associates of Khomeini, showed up in prisons, as well. Public confessions and recantations became a featured serial on Iranian television. The prison system was centralized and expanded to accommodate the increasing number of arrests. Prison officials, some of them prisoners during the Shah's reign, had learned how to outdo what their captors had done to them.

Chapter 4 narrates recantations of the leadership of the Tudeh Party during 1983 and 1984. To everyone's surprise, the oldest and highest-ranking members of the party went on television not only to confess to "treason," "subversion," and miscellaneous "horrrendous crimes," but also to recant their own lives, ideology, and party. The confessions generated many debates among "émigré intellectuals, newspapers in exile, and rival political parties," but Abrahamian tries to "place these confessions in their context" by rejecting propaganda about the arrest of party members as "Soviet spies." He believes that the reason for their arrest was the party's increasing criticism of the regime's policies toward newspapers and women, and the expansion of war to Iraqi territory. To disprove the espionage charge, Abrahamian selectively quotes a Soviet agent in Iran at the time, Vladimir Kuzichkin: "[e]very intelligence officer in the KGB knows that the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party categorically forbids the KGB to approach members of other communist parties" (p. 178). Analyzing these forced confessions in detail, Abrahamian neither finds them true nor a proof of treason by the party members. They "were big on mea culpa but small on incriminating facts" (p. 201).

The last chapter is the most painful narrative to read. For the first time, a historian tries to document the mass executions of 1988 in Iran—an event that went virtually unnoticed in the Western press and continues to remain a taboo subject in the Iranian press, even in the papers of the Second Khordad Front. During this operation, some 2,500 to 12,000—depending on the source—Iranian prisoners lost their lives in summary executions, often determined on the basis of a few questions identifying them as heathens or mulhid. Abrahamian rejects different views that attribute these killings to a hunger strike in Evin, prison overcrowding, scaring the opposition and terrorizing the public, the acceptance of the U.N. resolution for a cease-fire in the Iran–Iraq War, and a military offensive launched by the mujahedin in western Iran. He believes that losing the war and ailing health caused Khomeini to be concerned about the divisions among his associates and their rapprochement with the West. "To forge unity, Khomeini came up with a two-pronged strategy: the Salman Rushdie fatwa and the mass executions" (p. 219). The first would isolate Iran and prevent any future détente with the West. The latter would "weed out the half-hearted from the true believers" among his followers and would silence them on human-rights issues. As a result, when Khomeini died, "he could feel confident that he was leaving behind a regime free of weak-kneed and halfhearted supporters... Khomeini's creative genius should never be underestimated" (pp. 220–21).

I find Abrahamian's explanations, at this point, to be a bit far-fetched. Accounts of prisoners and a speech made by Ayatollah Musavi Ardebili at the time make it clear that over-
crowding and the mujahedin offensive had much to do with this massacre. In this regard, Abrahamian is right in connecting the resignation of Aytollah Montazeri, Khomeini's heir-designate, to what went on in Iranian prisons in the 1980s. Most Iranian analysts have viewed his forced resignation as a result of a power struggle around Khomeini. Although the power struggle was an element, Montazeri's views on internal issues and his associates' actions within the prison system at the time were more decisive factors in his fall.

During the 1980s, the Islamic Republic experienced unprecedented prison overcrowding. By 1987, the situation had become so bad that prisoners had to take turns for sleeping space. It was in this period that terms such as ye-kati (sleeping on only one shoulder due to the lack of space) and sardini (sleeping with one's head adjacent to the next person's feet so that the space is used maximally, as in a sardine can) found widespread use in prisons. What was the cause of this overcrowding?

First, facing an armed threat from the mujahedin and other leftist groups, the Islamic Republic had resorted to massive arrests of these groups and their sympathizers in the early 1980s. Second, confronted with several deadly bomb attacks in the decade, the regime arrested indiscriminately anyone whom it considered to show suspicious attitudes or ways of thought. Third, Montazeri's associates in prisons were consistent that prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners should comply with their religious values. Having experienced torture and prison life under the Shah, issues of freedom, torture, and fairness were very close to Montazeri's heart, whereas Khomeini, who had never experienced a prison term, was more concerned with state-building within Iran and exporting his brand of Islamic ideology beyond the country's borders. Political prisoners of that period mention that Montazeri's representatives were always present in the courts, insisting on reasonable proof for the establishment of guilt. This resulted in many unresolved cases in which the evidence was not adequate and the case was sent back to the prosecutor. As the regime was determined not to dismiss any case at all, no matter how baseless, thousands lived in prisons with their fates undetermined.

The conservative forces around Khomeini, headed by Azadollah Ladjevardi as the head of prisons, were anxious to “clean up” prisons. The obstacle to such a plan was Montazeri's opposition and his associates' presence in prisons. Violation of the secrecy code regarding the Iran-Contra affair by Mehdi Hashemi, a very close associate and relative of Montazeri, provided an excellent opportunity for engineering Montazeri's fall. Coincidentally, at this time the mujahedin crossed the Iranian border in the hope of capturing an Iranian city. This gave the regime enough of an excuse to go ahead with the plan. Montazeri's public and private complaint sealed his fate. He had to abandon the idea of replacing Khomeini, because, as Khomeini put it, he was too soft-hearted and naive to run a state. He was asked to submit his resignation; it was not his choice, as Abrahamian says.

Abrahamian draws on a vast number of primary sources, especially prisoners' memoirs and opposition papers, and skillfully weaves the information together with his interviews and observations. The result is a compelling blend of narrative and social analysis typical of Abrahamian's historiography. The book will surely draw fire from different corners. Historians may find it hard to prove or unlikely to be true that the Islamic Republic's prisons outdo in brutality all previous or contemporary imprisonment systems. It would be unfortunate if those whose country focus is not primarily Iran dismiss the study as local exaggeration for global attention, and therefore do not take it seriously. Iranian nationalists will object to the author's sympathy for and attempt to justify the Tudeh Party's policies and activities. Opposition activists will be curious to know why so many Tudeh members broke down under torture and exceeded everyone's expectations in their recantations. Feminists may find Abrahamian too quick to dismiss the charge by many female former prisoners that they were often subjected to guards' sexual advances and requests for sikhah (temporary marriage). Their accounts of prison experiences, especially those of women with children (arrested with their mothers or born in prison), are too many and too serious to be left out. Religious-nationalists
and the mujahedin will object to the relatively small number of pages and words devoted to discussing the activities and fate of prisoners from their ranks, who, in the case of the mujahedin outnumbered those of any other groups. In addition, social scientists may well question matters of evidence, sources, and details. They will be concerned about the heavy reliance on prisoners’ memoirs as a source of information and will wonder how accurately one can write about the details of life, structures, statistics, and organizational procedures in a country’s prisons without visiting or having access to official sources not available outside of the country. Some may even pick up on minor errors, such as incorrect translations (e.g., “the epoch’s pain” instead of “the dregs of time” for Amoui’s book), mispronunciations (e.g., “Anjavi-Shirazi” instead of “Anjavi-Shirazi”), and the statement that Mahmud Behazin translated Roman Rolands’ Jean-Christophe in prison after May 1983 (a book Behazin had translated and published more than a decade previously).

However, these issues should not keep anyone from acknowledging the contribution, significance, and timeliness of this work. Books such as this one serve as a catharsis that breaks the conspiracy of silence surrounding the issue among the ruling elite, bring a sense of relief to surviving victims, alert us to the fate of current prisoners, and lay the ground for further research, inquiries, searches for victims, and punishment for perpetrators. It is never too soon to document, expose, and discuss the horrors of prison life and the psychological and physical torture inflicted on prisoners of conscience. The sooner facts are found and public outcry is mobilized, the quicker victims’ anguish is relieved and their pain is dealt with. Without such a recognition and outcry, these cruelties continue, victims are ignored, and the survivors remain untreated. To this effect, Abrahamian’s initiative is welcome and worth following by other academics.